



Missouri – The Cave State

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Caves Abound in Missouri

A cave is a natural underground opening large enough to explore; therefore, a cave may be a rock shelter, or a pit opening in the bottom of a sinkhole, or a cavernous, many-roomed passage that extends deep into the earth.

Missouri has more than 5,600 recorded caves, including 20 show caves, which are open to the public for guided tours. Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and several other states also have many caves. A vast amount of information about caves has been published and is available for people to read and study. Speleology is the science of caves. People who study caves are called speleologists. A person who explores caves for recreation is often called a spelunker, a term that is widely used by the media. However, throughout the United States, most cave explorers and researchers prefer to be called “cavers.”



While show cave operators welcome all visitors, the owners of wild caves (caves not developed for public touring or use), are not always accommodating. Most of the wild caves of Missouri are on private property. Permission should be obtained before you attempt to visit a cave on private property; otherwise, you will be trespassing and may be prosecuted. Caves can also be found in many state parks, on state conservation and wildlife refuge lands, and on federal lands such as in the Mark Twain National Forest or the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Permits should be obtained before exploring wild caves on state and federal lands because some of the caves are closed to visitors to protect endangered animal species and for other reasons.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources considers caves important natural resources because of their unique beauty, their history, and their role in a healthy environment. They play key roles in groundwater movement, serve as habitats for threatened and endangered animal species, and often yield the bones of prehistoric animals as well as the artifacts of prehistoric generations of mankind. They provide outstanding opportunities for studying and gaining a better understanding of the geology of our landscape, and the relationships between the environment we see at the surface and the one that is hidden beneath our feet.

The need to protect the fragile beauty of Missouri's caves was recognized a century ago by Luella Owen, one of Missouri's earliest female geologists. “The caves in this region (southern

Missouri) have been deprived of great quantities of their beautiful adornments by visitors,” she wrote. “The gift of beauty should always be honored and protected for the public good.”

In 1975, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, supported by the Missouri Department of Conservation, the Missouri Speleological Survey, the Missouri Caves Association and others were instrumental in the passage of the Cave Resources Act in 1980 by the Missouri Legislature.

The Cave Resources Act protects Missouri caves by prohibiting vandalism. It offers protection to the surface of a cave as well as the natural materials it contains, such as stalactites, stalagmites, cave life, and paleontological (fossil) remains. It recognizes the value of caves by establishing specific penalties for vandalism, but at the same time maintains the right of private cave owners to manage or use their caves as they see fit.

It also provided cave owners legal authority to protect their caves from trespassers. The law helps to protect the quality of Missouri’s groundwater supplies by establishing specific legal protection to anyone whose well supply or spring has been polluted by someone using a cave for sewage disposal or other pollution causing purposes. Since its establishment, the Cave Resources Act has been used successfully to prosecute violators who have committed acts of vandalism and trespass.



Cave exploration can be a fascinating, educational, safe pursuit if undertaken wisely. You should be properly equipped, accompanied by experienced cavers and observe the basic rules of safe caving.

Never go caving alone, always have three dependable sources of light for each member of the party, tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return in the event rescue is necessary, get permission from the cave owner and wear a hard hat. Inside the cave you should use good judgment and observe the cavers motto “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.”

If you are truly interested in learning more about caves and becoming a Missouri caver, you should join an organized caving group. For more information contact the Missouri Speleological Survey at mospeleo.org, Ozark Caving: ozarkcaving.com, or the Missouri Caves and Karst Conservancy: mocavesandkarst.org

Many of Missouri’s show caves also have Web sites that provide information about their attraction and caves in general.

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